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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

12 December 1985

Iran-Iraq: Prospects for an Iranian Offensive in the South [REDACTED]

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Summary

Iran and Iraq are preparing for a major Iranian offensive along the southern front near Al Basrah, although the attack probably will not occur before March 1986. Iranian forces have gained almost total control of the Al-Hawizah marshes and are in a better position to attack than they were in March 1985, when they last attempted a major offensive in the area. Iraq has improved its defenses and built up significant strength opposite the marsh. [REDACTED]

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Shortages of critical heavy equipment and coordination problems between Army and Revolutionary Guard units will limit Iran's chance for a breakthrough. Iraqi commanders, however, also will have significant problems: fragile morale, terrain that makes it difficult for them to concentrate their strength in key areas, and political interference in military decisions. [REDACTED]

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This paper was prepared at the request of the Director of the Decision Support Staff, NSC Crisis Management Center, by [REDACTED] the Persian Gulf Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Persian Gulf Division, NESA [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

We believe Iran has a significant, though less than even, chance to win an important tactical and psychological victory by cutting the main Baghdad-Al Basrah highway. Such an outcome would depend on more Iraqi failures than we believe probable. The more likely scenario is an Iranian defeat with heavy casualties. [REDACTED]

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The buildup of men and material in Iran's southern sector indicates that Tehran is once again contemplating a major offensive around Al Basrah. The southern region offers advantages to Iran largely because the terrain and weather in the area degrade Iraq's capabilities more than Iran's. The marshes and rivers in the south slow and sometimes stop the movement of the mechanized vehicles Iraq depends upon for its counterattacks. Moreover, if Iran attacks during the spring--as it has in the past--the rain, wind, and low cloud ceilings normal for that region and season will hinder Iraqi air support. The open plain of the central region, on the other hand, offers Iran's infantry no immediate objective or protection from counterattacks by Iraqi armor. The mountainous terrain in the north aids Iraq's defense, although it does give some advantage to infantry--the mainstay of Iran's forces--over armor. [REDACTED]

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Iran's Objectives

Iran's strategic objective would be to capture enough territory and inflict enough casualties to break Iraqi morale, achieve a psychological victory, and sustain domestic Iranian support for the war. Iran's minimum tactical objective would be to establish a foothold in Iraqi lines and then quickly expand its bridgehead to the Tigris River and north and south along the strip of land separating the Tigris from the Al Hawizah marsh. After consolidating its positions in preparation for Iraqi counterattacks, Iran could interdict the main highway to Al Basrah with direct and indirect fire from the east bank of the Tigris. [REDACTED]

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Iran also might attack farther south, closer to the Shatt al-Arab. [REDACTED] small boats stockpiled in that area, although currently there are no troops associated with these boats. An attack there probably would be a feint to tie down Iraqi troops, but it might also be intended to capture a secondary objective. [REDACTED]

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Iranian Preparations

Iran has been preparing since October 1985 for an offensive north of Al Basrah. After moving several brigades and divisions from the north back to the south, as of early December the Iranians had concentrated six regular

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army divisions and at least 11 Revolutionary Guard divisions in the area. Iran also is stockpiling the equipment needed for an offensive. [REDACTED]

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The Iranians are in good positions from which to attack. Numerous small attacks since May 1985 gradually have given Iran almost total control of the Al-Hawizah marsh. Iran's lines are much closer to the Iraqi defenses than they were at the start of its failed offensive in March 1985. Iran now can move men more quickly across the marsh. Newly constructed causeways and pontoon bridges will assist this movement, although the flooding of some nearby areas in November by Iraq caused Iran problems [REDACTED]

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Iran claims to be deploying to the war fronts large numbers of the Basij, the lightly trained reserve force attached to the Revolutionary Guard. Since October 1985 there have been regular announcements on the mobilization of reserve units. The Basij units would be essential for an Iranian offensive. [REDACTED]

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The battalion-sized attacks that Iran has been launching in the northern and central regions since summer probably are intended to heighten Iraqi uncertainty and possibly to divert Iraqi forces from the Al Basrah area. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Additionally, Iran may have its Kurdish allies in northern Iraq increase the number and scale of their attacks. [REDACTED]

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Iraqi Responses

Iraq anticipates an Iranian offensive. Initially slow to react, in November the Iraqis began bombing Iranian concentrations in the south and launched small probes against Iranian positions in an effort to keep them off balance. Iraq also intensified air reconnaissance [REDACTED] efforts, moved reserves near the forward positions, increased patrols in the marshes, and belatedly improved its defensive positions in the marshes and near the Shatt al-Arab. [REDACTED]

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Baghdad also has been redeploying units to the south (the III, IV, VI, and VII Corps areas), where it now has 16 infantry divisions, two mechanized infantry divisions and four armored divisions. Iraq has built jetties into the marsh as well as alternative roads to increase its mobility in the area. Additionally, the Iraqis have improved their earthen fortifications, minefields, barbed wire obstacles, anti-tank ditches and infantry trenches. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

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Balance of Forces

Iraq has a significant advantage in firepower on the southern front. Baghdad has many more tanks and artillery pieces as well as vast stocks of ammunition. Iraq also has a proven chemical warfare capability, which it has used successfully in past attacks against massed Iranian forces. Additionally, Iraq has overcome the great advantage in infantry held by Iran earlier in the war (see table).

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Estimated Manpower and Equipment - Southern Front, November 1985

	<u>Iraq</u>	<u>Iran</u>
Armored vehicles (a)	2200	500
Artillery	1050	200
Personnel	250,000-300,000	200,000-250,000(b)

(a) Operational vehicles only.

(b) Does not include irregular forces currently being mobilized. These units could possibly provide between 100,000 and 150,000 troops.

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Much of Iraqi's apparent superiority, however, is negated by the tactical requirements for fighting in the south. While Baghdad must spread its units along the entire front, Iran can mass its forces to achieve local superiority. Additionally, the narrowness of the area along the Tigris River precludes the Iraqis from concentrating many of their forces there.

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Iranian Problems

Iran has many shortcomings that reduce its chances for success. In particular, logistical problems and poor coordination between Army and Revolutionary Guard units limit the Iranians' ability to conduct sustained operations with sufficient fire support.

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Iran's medium-sized offensive in the northern sector in September 1985, quickly fell apart because of ineffective air and artillery support. Despite over six months of preparations, the Iranians were unable to coordinate their fire control or mass their forces at critical points. widespread failure of troops to follow orders. Desertions increased as

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losses mounted, suggesting poor morale and bad leadership. Current Iranian efforts to reorganize the Revolutionary Guard and eventually to merge it with the regular military forces will not significantly alleviate these problems for at least the next several months. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Iranian troops doing without uniforms, fuel, and many other supplies. Iran particularly suffers from a shortage of heavy equipment. [REDACTED] Tehran has lost over 20 percent of its heavy weapons to battle losses and equipment failures during the past year. While much of this equipment would not be necessary for a southern offensive, the lack of artillery and other heavy weapons would inhibit Iran's ability to follow up on the opportunities provided by its infantry. If Iran were to establish a bridgehead, it would need to move this type of equipment forward to defeat what would certainly be a heavily armed Iraqi counterattack. [REDACTED]

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Iran probably will not be able to replace the past year's equipment losses until the middle of 1986. This will not necessarily prevent Tehran, however, from taking advantage of the current rainy season in the south (November through April); Iran has attacked in the past despite shortages of critical equipment. It would, however, make a breakthrough less likely. [REDACTED]

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Iraqi Weaknesses

Political interference in military operations is Iraq's biggest handicap. Iraqi commanders, wary of criticism from Baghdad, probably will continue to react cautiously and slowly to Iranian actions. Iraq's unwillingness to take casualties or lose equipment (particularly warplanes) has been evident. Baghdad, after ceding most of the marsh to Iran, has been slow to stop or harass the Iranian buildup. Despite having air superiority, Iraq has not made full use of its air power to bomb enemy concentrations, causeways, or bridges. Baghdad's timidity could provide the Iranians with an opportunity to push forward quickly and consolidate their gains before an Iraqi counterattack. [REDACTED]

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The Iraqis also will have to contend with Iranian activities on the other fronts, even though Iranian forces in these areas are insufficient to threaten Iraq seriously. In particular, brigade-size attacks in the central sector similar to those of 1984 and Kurdish attacks in the north could draw Iraqi units from the south or at least take Baghdad's attention away from the Al Basrah area. [REDACTED]

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Finally, Iraqi morale is fragile [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Even limited Iranian success in the early part of a battle, particularly if it resulted in high Iraqi casualties, might be enough to demoralize front-line Iraqi troops. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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Timing

In our judgment, Tehran probably will not attempt a major offensive before March 1986. Despite public pronouncements of an impending operation, we believe that the Iranian leadership, aware of Iran's weaknesses and the risks involved, will wait until it has replaced more of its losses and conducted additional training. In the meantime, the Iranians probably will launch occasional battalion-size attacks in an effort to improve their position and contribute to Iraqi war weariness. Preparations could be completed sooner, however, and Iran has sufficient forces in the south to start an attack with little warning. []

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Outcome of an Offensive

We believe Iran has a significant, but less than even, chance to secure the narrow strip of land along the Tigris between Al Qurnah and Qal at Saslih and to cut the main Baghdad-Al Basrah highway. Such a victory, however, would depend at least as much on Iraqi mistakes and failures as on Iranian efforts. []

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Iran would increase the likelihood of success if it:

- made a concerted effort to procure and deploy new equipment in order to attack during the rainy season.
- took advantage of inclement weather that impedes Iraqi air operations and counterattacks.
- expanded its bridgehead from the edge of the marshes across the highway within the first 48 hours of the operation.
- brought its available heavy equipment across the marsh before the Iraqi counterattack.

Iraq would contribute to the odds of an Iranian success if it:

- failed to interdict Iran's concentration of forces or their movement across the marshes.
- failed to mount a timely counterattack.
- did not use its chemical warfare capability. []

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Baghdad's defenses are such that Iran will suffer heavy casualties. If Iran consolidated its initial position along the Tigris, however, Iraq would also suffer huge losses in any attempt to push the Iranians back. []

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[redacted]

Iraqi morale would become a critical factor if the Iranians succeeded in gaining a solid foothold on the Tigris. In such circumstances, the Iraqi military probably would have to use harsh measures to maintain discipline. The Iraqis probably would go into a limited retreat before counterattacking, and might not counterattack at all if the Iranians established several lines of defensive berms around their position. [redacted]

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If Iraq did not drive the Iranians back into the marshes, we believe it would have a difficult time portraying the offensive as anything but a major Iraqi defeat. The battle would further tarnish President Saddam Husayn's regime while strengthening Tehran's resolve to continue the war. In desperation, Iraq might act on its threats to increase air and missile attacks against Iranian cities and economic targets. [redacted]

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In our judgment, however, the most likely outcome of an Iranian offensive will be another Iranian failure similar to the one in March 1985. Although Iran probably would gain a foothold in the Iraqi lines, we believe that Iraqi forces, if they respond quickly, could push the Iranians back within a few days. An even more severe Iranian defeat would almost certainly follow if:

- Iran could not reach its objectives quickly.
- Iraqi warplanes vigorously attacked Iranian bridges and causeways, preventing heavy equipment from reaching the bridgehead.
- Iraq brought all of its weapons (including chemical munitions) to bear on the Iranian position. [redacted]

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Under these circumstances, an Iranian defeat in conjunction with a stepped-up Iraqi propaganda campaign could lead to demonstrations in Iran similar to those in March 1985. As long as Ayatollah Khomeini lives, however, Iran will almost certainly continue the war. [redacted]

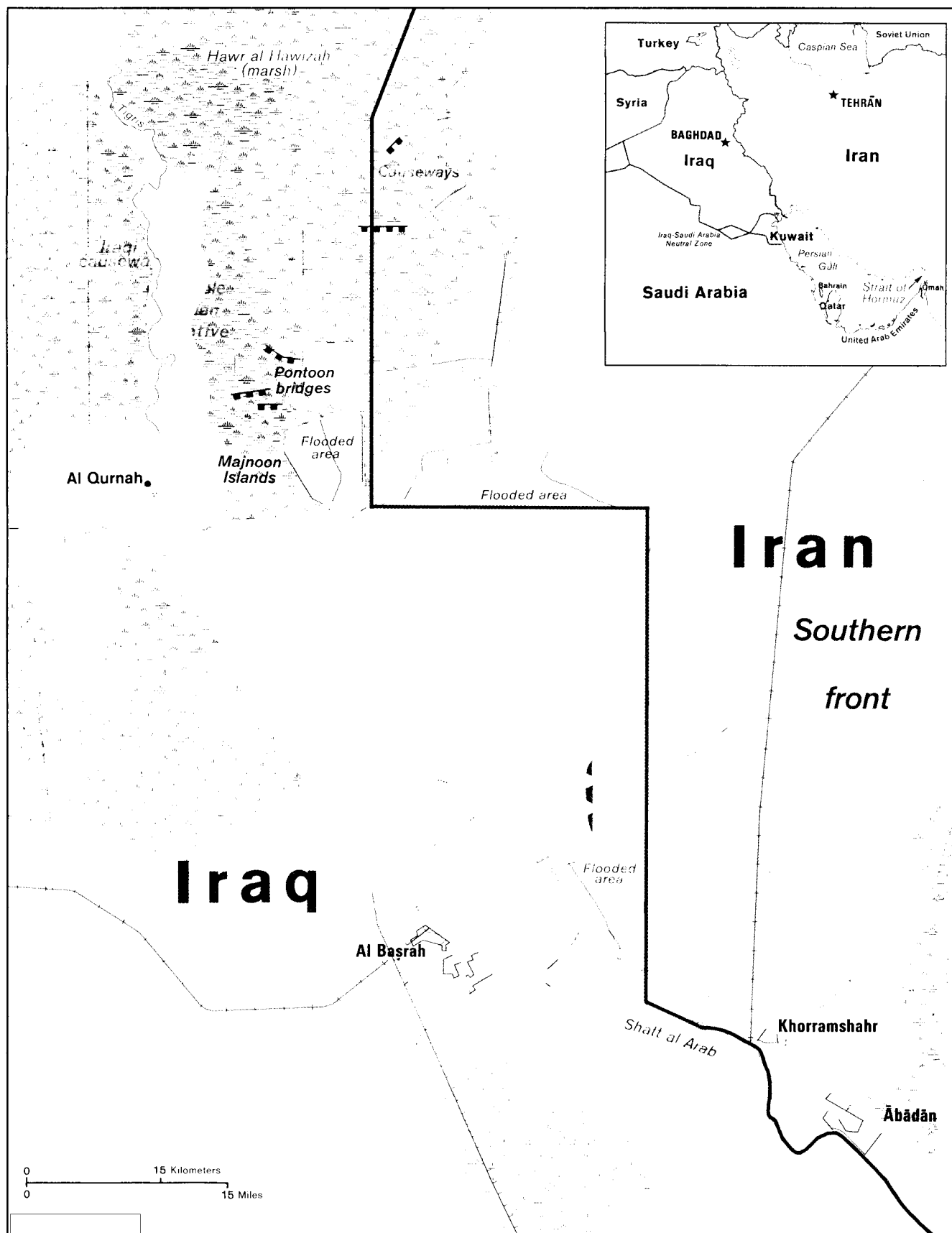
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